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Why do former high school athletes earn more than everyone else?

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“That’s alright, that’s okay, you’ll be working for us someday!” The cheer of the nerd—part insult, part sour grapes—has been sung at high school sporting events all across the country. Shouted toward student-athletes by fans of the opposing team, the implied message is quite clear: You may be the better athletes, but we’ll do better in life. A recent study appears to uproot this idea.

In “[Sports at work: anticipated and persistent correlates of participation in high school athletics](#)” (*Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, May 2015), Kevin M. Kniffin, Brian Wansink, and Mitsuru Shimizu find that former high school athletes are more likely to occupy high-status jobs than are people who did not play a sport. Rather than merely attempt to show that former student-athletes earn more money, a fact the authors concede has already been proven in numerous studies, researchers conducted two studies designed to discover why this relationship exists. The answer, according to the authors, is that former student-athletes are believed to possess certain personality traits that employers covet: higher levels of leadership, confidence, and self-esteem.

In the primary study, participants were asked to rate four types of people—former varsity basketball players, former varsity cross-country runners, former band members, and former yearbook members—on a variety of traits including leadership, self-confidence, self-respect, and willingness to contribute to charity and volunteer. As the authors initially hypothesized, former athletes were rated higher in the areas of leadership, self-confidence, and self-respect. Former band and yearbook members were perceived to be more charitable and more likely to volunteer.

From these findings, the authors inferred that hiring personnel are likely to see former high school athletes as possessing “organizationally beneficial personality traits.” That is, the authors assumed that if people generally perceive former student-athletes as better leaders, more confident, and more self-assured, employers will generally hold the same view. The authors then conducted a second study to confirm the validity of these perceptions.

In the second study, a sample of 931 World War II veterans was evaluated. The sample was whittled down to men old enough to have completed high school by the end of the war. The men were surveyed to establish measures of leadership, self-confidence, self-respect, and prosocial behavior (volunteerism and charitable giving); they also were asked about their careers. Researchers compared responses from those who had played a varsity sport with responses from those who had not (controlling for age and hometown population).

The results of the second study, once again, confirmed the authors’ initial hypothesis. Former high school student-athletes scored significantly higher in the metrics of leadership, self-confidence, and self-respect. They also disproportionately had careers in upper management. Interestingly, former student-athletes were found to be more likely to volunteer and give to charity, confirming the authors’ prediction that “participation in team sports is a correlate of prosocial, community-oriented behaviors.”

Taken at face value, this research indicates that sports participation benefits student-athletes long after they leave the playing field. These studies hint at a pro-athlete bias that might prove helpful to jobseekers. While most prospective employers aren’t likely to ask “What sport(s) did you play in high

school?” a well-placed mention of past participation in the resume, or a casual reference during the interview, might just be the difference between landing the job and ending up empty-handed.